In a parlor somewhere in the Midwest...

Visual Rhetoric belongs in the First Year Writing Classroom: Visual Rhetoric is Rhetoric

by: Suzanne Webb :: February 9, 2007

“I’d like to introduce you to...”

...an ongoing conversation which lies in between tech writing, visual rhetoric, graphic design, and first-year composition. Ten years ago, the conversation seemed more of controversy as educators wrestled with conflicting ideas and a lack of empirical research from tech-based writing classrooms. Even today certain educators remain skeptical, while many like-minded teachers teach that visual rhetoric is rhetoric and therefore must be stitched into the very fabric that holds first year writing together. Teaching the ability to recognize the implications (the meaning of) visual rhetoric and teaching the need for (the production of) visual rhetoric in comp classes is not only preferred, it is a must.

If hard to understand how visual rhetoric makes an argument, perhaps remembering Sanskrit and Hieroglyphics--where pictures and letters intermingled to tell a story, and in so doing persuaded their respective readers--can help doubters visualize the power of the visual. In modern times, advertising has been persuading audiences for years with visuals. We as composition teachers must help our students to learn to do the same.

Those who were and/or still are talking about these issues include Stephen Bernhardt, Sam Dragga, Christina Haas, Gail Haiwisher, Mary Hocks, Jim Porter, Cynthia Selfe, Craig Stroupe, Patricia Sullivan, Ann Wysoki, Kathleen Yancy, and (of course) Gunther Kress. And to whom are they speaking? To you and I, the teachers of writing, housed in a variety of departments and in various programs. To you and I, integrating all of these concepts into our classrooms, departments, and programs will ensure our students gain a holistic and a realistic view of Composition, Tech Writing, Visual Rhetoric, Rhetoric, Technology, Writing technologies, Theory, Genre, Multimedia, and Design. More importantly, though, the students will then have a tight grasp of the skills and the technologies needed to make a real difference—to communicate effectively—as they progress on into graduate schools and/or into the business world.
We have to nurture our students to the point they are content in their abilities to communicate on paper as well as electronically; to one another, to their bosses, to their co-workers, to their professors, and to the rest of the world. To do all of this communicating well, the students must become proficient in using tools that work to facilitate these communications; students must become proficient in using visual rhetorics.

As Scott DeWitt says, “we have to look to the past to review what we have learned through research completed in the last ten years; we have to look to the future”…

This on-going conversation...

Seeing the Text
Stephen A. Bernhardt
College Composition and Communication, Vol. 37, No. 1, February 1986

“The written mode necessitates the arrangement of script or typeface, a process which gives visual cues to the verbal organization of the text.”

Bernhardt discusses how “paragraph indentation, margins, capitalization, and sentence punctuation provide some information to the reader;” they give visual cues.

Bernhardt shows an extended example of a text which uses a piece of art, subheads and tabs or columns to help organize its contents for its readers. This consideration for audience is certainly a rhetorical mode.

“With a visible text, it may not be fruitful to talk about paragraphs in terms of topic sentences and support, or opening and closing sentences, or sentences of transition. In fact, it may not be useful to speak of paragraphs at all, but of sections or chunks. In the visible text the headings take over.”

Bernhardt was “seeing the text” in the mid-1980s. Did the field not notice?

Gail E. Hawisher and Cynthia L. Selfe, Evolving Perspectives on Computers and Composition Studies: Questions for the 1990s
“Where pedagogy has been influenced by current literary and critical theory, teachers ask students to read hypertexts, using both the electronic texts and their students’ multiple readings as a pedagogical framework for course design; often students author hypertexts as their major “writing” projects.”

“Hypertext provides a significant resource for teachers who wish to integrate theory, pedagogy, and technology.”

“By its intersection with the very nature of reading and writing … hypertext offers help to students in bringing together the acts of reading and writing, both cognitively and contextually.”

Haiwisher and Selfe urge educators to: “1. to continue to investigate and, thus, better understand the cross-disciplinary influences of hypertext on composition studies; 2. to examine the common threads that bring together hypertext and composition studies, threads that possibly have been lost already in the hypertext explosion; 3. to view critically hypertext’s integration into our curricula by reporting findings from empirical research studies.”

Haiwisher and Selfe’s questions from 20 years ago are the same questions we should still be asking today as the abilities of our technologies reach far beyond those in existence of the 1990s— their words are just as appropriate too.

Scott Lloyd DeWitt
The Current Nature of Hypertext Research in Computers and Composition Studies: An Historical Perspective

In 1996 DeWitt took note that using technology in the writing classroom had not yielded many empirical research studies.

DeWitt warns the field that “we must gather two kinds of information, complete two
kinds of scholarly tasks: we have to look to the past to review what we have learned through research completed in the last ten years; we have to look to the future, the 1990s, to set forth a continuing scholarly agenda.” This advice doesn't change, only the years do. Still there is a less than acceptable amount of empirical data. DeWitt’s historical perspective can help scholars and educators today maintain perspective. Technology changes at astonishing rates. Long gone is “Moore’s Law” and now we find ourselves in the age of an instance. And, that makes DeWitt’s call for research even more pertinent today.


It seems the field of (whichever we call it) English or Writing or Composition or Communication or Rhet/Comp likes to live and die by Napoleon’s rule of “Divide and Conquer.” George and Trimbur speak to this phenomenon in the field and ask “Whatever happened to the 4th C?” The 4th C being "communication.” Isn’t that what it’s all about? Communicating? When we divide and diss one another, we are only conquering ourselves – and I’m afraid conquering our abilities to help our students be the best they can be – be great communicators.

But, by 1962, even the term communication all but disappeared from academia. “[B]y 1962 the "communication battle" did appear to be over, with the term "communication" dropping out of professional and scholarly use. How to account for this rapid demise of communication? What did happen to the 4th C-not to mention those 200-plus communication courses? Albert R. Icitzhaber notes in "4C, Freshman English, and the Future" that the "only major respect in which the freshman English scene" in 1963 "differs from that of fifteen years ago is that communication courses, which then were flourishing, now are nearly extinct” (136).

The inclusion of the four skills-reading, writing, speaking, and listening-was not simply a quantitative gain over the two-skill composition course. Rather, Dean says, the "fusion of the four skills has led to a central unified objective; and this definitive aim is to see and comprehend the communicative process as a dynamic whole, to create an awareness of the interacting forces that condition it at each turn" (81 ).

Sadly, when I hear that “the way the teaching of writing has defined itself historically in opposition to-or at least in suspicion of-the prevailing means of mass communication,” I
think immediately of creative writing departments who believe that only the literary
canon is culture—true culture—high culture. I feel composition studies seems to poo-
poo communication in the same ways. This is not good. This is not good at all. Divide.

Christina Haas
On the Relationship Between Old
and New Technologies
*Computers and Composition* 16, 209–228
1999

Once we needed to be “literate.” Once we needed
to “have literacy.” Hass presents the idea that
in today’s technological world, students must
have “multiple literacy technologies;” that without
these technologies, we end up with an “overly
simple model” of technology which just “perpetuate[s] inaccurate cultural narratives
about technology.” So we educators must dig into the multi layers of communication
and into the multi layers of technology so that our students leave us with those
“multiple literacy technologies” which are ever-so-important in today’s multi literacy world.

Williams, Sean D.
Part II: Toward an integrated composition pedagogy in hypertext.

Williams’ argument is my argument. Williams argues that verbal and visual media need
to be integrated into composition classrooms. We as teachers should be helping
students acquire skills in visual literacy. Williams black flags binary modes of teaching
and suggests we take “multiplicity of media for granted.” Williams encourages student
analysis of other works, but reminds us that a student’s own argument will be the main
focus. This “integrated composition pedagogy encourages students, therefore, to
build not only by adequately representing and including other viewpoints, but also by
bringing multiple media forms into contact with one another” (125). This way students
have the ability to use an “interaction of media forms and content because it is the
interaction that moves us away from reproducing the limitations of arguing in one medium" (125).

Does the font help to carry the message? Does the indentation of the quotation make it stand out? "These are rhetorical decisions" (125). In this comp class, students will practice both looking and doing (thus practicing both). They will look at existing work, critique it and then produce small pieces (the doing) articulating both traditional and non-traditional style choices.

James E. Porter
Why technology matters to writing: A cyberwriter’s tale

“Technology does indeed matter to writing—and in significant ways. But how it matters can vary, depending on the particular technology, the habits and attitudes of the individual writer, and the context of learning and use.” And that context of learning and use depends directly on educators giving ample time for students to gain skill in using the technologies available to them. By having “the human and machine working in concert (joined at the interface) and writing in a particular social, political, and rhetorical context,” exploring what writing does; what writing with technology can do, we educators help our students to live “where visual and video forms of expression supersede [mere] alphabetic text.” And, that’s a great place to be situated today.

Gunther Kress
Multimodality, Multimedia, and Genre: A Multimodal View of Genre. Literacy in the New Media Age
London: Routledge, 2003

Kress’ interests lie in the “interrelations of texts” and his examples of “scientificness” in this essay allow readers to see how “the two aspects of the text jointly seem to suggest …
meaning." Kress discusses how "both written and visual parts; each mode, writing and image, [do] distinctly different and specific things."

Kress calls for "theories of meaning [to be] rethought and remade". He advocates for a "social theory of genre" as an "essential element" bringing about these changes. Yet, do we have this theory yet? Kress was advocating for these changes in '03; here we are in '07.

Mary E. Hocks  
**Understanding Visual Rhetoric in Digital Writing Environments**  
*C C C 5 4 : 4, 2003*

Critiquing and producing writing in digital environments offers a welcome return to rhetorical principles and an important pedagogy of writing as design. Scholarship in rhetoric and composition has begun to emphasize the central role of visual rhetoric for writers, especially those working in digital writing environments. Visual rhetoric, or visual strategies used for meaning and persuasion, is hardly new.

"Design projects … bring the concept of multiliteracy squarely into the middle of the composition process …[and] …help students design an activist academic project that represents new knowledge for a real audience." And, isn’t rhetoric supposed to construct and represent new knowledge for a real audience?

"Design projects require writers to look at successful models, to think deeply about audience, to design visual and verbal arguments together, and to actively construct new knowledge." Exactly what rhetoric & writing is supposed to do. Visual rhetoric must be rhetoric!

Kathleen Blake Yancey  
**Made Not Only in Words:**  
Composition in a New Key  
*C C C Vol. 56, No. 2. December 2004*

Yancey states: "[T]echnology, if we continue to partition it off as just..."
something technical, or outside the parameters governing composing, or limit it to the screen of the course management system, or think of it in terms of the bells and whistles and templates of the PowerPoint screen, students in our classes learn only to fill up those templates and fill in those electric boxes”—sadly, much like the MEAP.

Yancey’s hard-hitting words – aimed at educators in a multiplicity of departments and programs, aren’t just hype either. We must have our students engage in technology throughout their time in the writing classroom and on into their business worlds; there they will still be utilizing technology to write. Their abilities must go beyond “fill[ing] in those electric boxes.”

The major shortcoming in this work? Yancey’s not using the technology as she pleads with educators to use the technology…where are her visuals?

Stroupe, Craig
“Visualizing English: Recognizing the Hybrid Literacy of Visual and Verbal Authorship on the Web.”

Stroupe’s hard-hitting article discusses the merits of having close “relations between words and images – in a larger sense, between the literacies of verbal and visual cultures – which function as a singly intended, if doubled-voiced rhetoric” (15) where one serves to reinforce the other.

As Stroupe critiques both Peter Elbow and Elizabeth Castro, he finds for us that “[w]ords don’t simply talk to words, but to images, links, horizontal lines – to every feature of the iconographic page [and] web pages still partly replicate the left-to-right, top-to-bottom verbal literacy of the written page” (25). Perhaps if we teachers in and around the field of English could talk with one another the way words talk to words and to images and to links, etc., perhaps then we could recognize all of these important literacies WITHIN our fields as “a wider, emergent networked culture. By visualizing its mostly verbal practices, English studies could both recognize its continuities with these extra-verbal cultures and, looking inward, really see the” (36) divisions between us, but not only between us but also between us and other fields which also teach communications. Other fields are relishing these times and gladly teaching complex multi-modal writing.
Anne France Wysocki
The Multiple Media of Texts: How onscreen and paper texts incorporate words, images, and other media

“That we associate particular visual arrangements with different genres of writing means that the visual arrangements do some of the work of the genre. …repetition of strategy.” Ann Wysocki’s name is repeated and her works quoted all through this ongoing conversation. Her voice speaks again and again and her rhetoric is visual rhetoric is rhetoric.

Wysocki asks, “What about making compositions that ask their audiences, in other words, to see and interact differently with texts, to consider arguments outside their usual experience?” Which makes me ask, “isn’t this exactly what we do when we ask students not to write those same-o same-o 5-paragraph essays for us?

Wysocki urges us to help our students not only to see the value in the visual, but to use that value as they go through their writing lives.

Cheryl Ball
Show, not tell: The value of new media scholarship

I want my students “to recognize and interpret the meaning-making potential of aesthetic modes used in new media scholarly texts”

I want my students to “enact and interpret an author’s argument through multimodal elements and navigational strategies.”

I want my students to have “the potential of reading and composing in new media as future avenues for scholarship in and out of the classroom.” Once my students leave the classroom and venture into the world of mass media (new, old and in-between) they will need to communicate effectively and it is through these strategies called to
the forefront by Cheryl Ball that will allow my students the ability to communicate effectively.

Anne Frances Wysocki
Away with Words: On the possibilities in unavailable designs
Computers and Composition 22 (2005) 55–62

Wysocki pleads for “a rhetorical focus in our teaching ... entwining context, purpose, audience, and communication strategies (including material choices).”

“This approach ... helps people working both within and across disciplines or materials to produce effective communication.”

Wysocki questions “what is gained and what is lost through any communication practice (see Selfe and Selfe), especially as computer technologies heighten our awareness of the visuality of texts,” but I find her most rhetorical rhetorical stance to be “how we use paper, ink, and pixels to shape—for better or worse—the actions of others.

Now that’s rhetoric.

Ron Fortune
“You’re not in Kansas anymore”: Interactions among semiotic modes in multimodal texts Computers and Composition 22 (2005) 49–54

Fortune is talking with Kress, Wysocki, Selfe & Selfe about “the relationship between word and image, a critical relationship in teaching students to develop genuinely multimodal texts.”

We don’t just want to help students develop genuinely multimodal texts, we want to work underneath that layer and help them develop the reasoning abilities to see what each layer of that multimodal work says and does. Otherwise we only give “a one-dimensional response to a multidimensional problem.”
Palmquist, Mike  
*Designing Writing: Creating Visual Documents with Digital Tools*  
Colorado State University. 2005. 144.

An innovative brief guide, *Designing Writing* shows students (and teachers) how to use principles of visual rhetoric in composing their own documents. Part One, "Designing for Effect," illustrates how design works with writing to achieve a variety of purposes; Part Two, "Understanding Design Elements," introduces the basic elements of document design; and Part Three, "Composing Public Documents," guides students through the process of designing essays, articles, brochures, flyers, multimedia presentations, and Web sites. De-sign-ing Writing. Just this past summer Mike Palmquist taught me to make callout boxes for emphasis and for effect. He taught me in his brief 133 pages.

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Lunsford, Andrea A.  
"Composing in a Digital Age." *The Everyday Writer.*  

This Lunsford text features a section on “Writing and Its Rhetorical Situations” in which she discusses brief histories of writing and reading. Lunsford then moves into considering what message a writer wants to send, their purpose, their audience. The next chapter on thinking visually covers topics such as how visuals create associations, and how visuals convey tone. “Focusing on Media and Design” guides students through improving their writing with word processors and email (something I urge teachers to cover more in-depth). The section closes with a crash-course in document design and an overview of design principles (CRAP). The overview includes use of white space and choosing fonts. This is a great intro chapter on design, which serves to deepen students’ critical thinking skills about textual and visual representations.

The material presented by Lunsford in this chapter of *The Everyday Writer* reinforces and compliments the findings of Robin Williams in her *Non-Designer’s Web Book* and will also serve to reinforce those same compatible concepts for the students.
“[S]cholars have different maps of where rhetoric and/or composition belongs.” Some
distrust technology development and continue a “love–hate relationship
between professional writing and English, and between professional writing and rhetoric
and/or composition.” Those tensions which continue fray at professional writing, English,
Composition, and Rhetoric—which ever name a department or program classifies it
under keep many a teacher from weaving technology-based writing into the fabric of
their classroom curriculum. Porter & Sullivan urge us to nip this skepticism in the bud.
else our students won’t be prepared for the world beyond their BAs.

Up until this point of my bibliography I thought the field was making progress, generally
accepting today’s technologies, and generally integrating them into their pedagogies.
Now, having read Porter’s 2007 piece, we must wonder if there are still skeptics who
choose to not send their students into the world with cutting-edge, state-of-the-art skills
in multi media and why on this globally-interconnected earth they would want to do that?

Wysocki wants students using her text to know “what textual strategies and arrangements
will best help [them] persuade audiences to consider matters in the way the composer
hopes.” This texts helps students to see how they can draw on design practices to make
their arguments do just that—persuade audiences to consider matters in the way the
composer hopes." Therefore she urges we teachers and our students draw on design because it is "similar to composition and rhetoric in several ways: both are concerned with audiences and with how audiences respond to what we make."

Wysocki’s main shortcomings in this text are two-fold. First, she over-uses colors. Sections are separated not only with divider pages but also by color and where color changes usually add to the consistency of a text, Wysocki’s tended to go overboard with color and it thereby detracts from her messages. Second, and related, many of the color choices themselves are poor ones in that they have little or no contrast to the white pages. This lack of contrast gives me as a reader an instant lack of interest in the content.

Sadly this means that the cliché “too much of a good thing…” has come true. While we do teach our students all of these great communication tools and techniques we must also to remember to teach them “everything in moderation.” That at many, many times in a rhetorical process “less is more.”

**A conclusion? No, it’s a beginning...**

I choose to end this framework with the oldest piece I encountered. Published in 1988 at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in the field of Graphic Design, this piece covered the rhetorical process; rational, emotional and ethical appeal; expression and content; metonymy, synecdoche, amplification, metaphor, personification, alliteration, anaphora, pun, and irony. These rhetorical concepts are as pertinent today as they were 20 years ago; *Design Papers* is as pertinent today as 20 years ago.


"To propose a rhetorical paradigm for graphic design is to suggest a new attitude of thinking about design, the way we see it, and consequently, the way it should be taught: it implies a shift away from a formalistic, aesthetic/stylistic imperative toward a functional, aesthetic/ethical imperative." This shift presumes that "all design has social, moral, and political dimensions that there is no sphere of pure information, and accepts the challenge to make designs that are conceptually, visually, and functional appropriate for particular clients and audiences in particular environments" (6).
Although almost 20 years old, *The Design Papers Rhetorical Handbook* shows great promise in discussing visuals as rhetorical. This text shows “a method of teaching graphic design which uses rhetoric … as a tool for generating design concepts” (1). This book is visual rhetoric -- at its most detail.

The figures of speech throughout *Design Papers* apply to textual and graphic representations. By using a series of precise images, this text shows the rhetorical process of communication and all of its intricacies. Ehses and Lupton saw this connection then; this connection is ever-so-much-more important today in our digitized world. Writing is design and design is writing. We must continue with the lessons put forth by Ehses and Lupton in this text and continue to teach visual rhetoric as rhetoric. Students, educators, and business people all must communicate with many cultures and in many modes; we—not even one of us—can afford to become a passive audience.

**Potential for further research…**

As I enter this parlor and start talking to the remaining guests, I’d like to have researched (and be researching) the use of two powerful tools in the composition classroom. I want to teach advanced word and powerpoint techniques as I think that students need a thorough grasp of these powerful, robust, and most common tools. I believe students need not only to be able to make a slideshow and write a letter, but they need to be able to command these two software to do far more. They need to command these two software to make visually, as well as textually compelling arguments. They need to know how to step away from “Dad’s Tie” and make a slideshow that commands their audience to take action. They also need to have a full report of communication skills; this means they need to be able to recognize rhetorical situations, to analyze them, to write to them, to use visuals to support their writing (in order to reel in their audiences), and they need to be able to articulate themselves orally and ethically about their decisions and about their chosen subject matters. This is no small task, but it is one that is accomplishable—if we begin now.

**Additional readings…**

Mary Sellen
Information Literacy in the General Education: A New Requirement for the 21st Century
Copyright © 2002 The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA.

Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright
Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture

The Visual Design Primer
Author’s note...
While I choose to use “multimedia” in my callouts, I am using this word to mean either Multimedia or New Media. Neither Gunther Kress nor Cheryl Ball would probably much approve of this approach, but in everything I’ve read about “new” media, authors use “multi” media to produce it, and therefore, in the interest of space and design, I made the rhetorical decision to allow the one to stand in for the other.